

Joining Up

Categories: Uncategorized

We were all rocked by the recent tragic events in the Orlando nightclub massacre. Even though this kind of event has become too commonplace in our society, the shock was still there. Then the usual political arguments broke out. Some saw it as a reason to tighten our immigration standards and do more to fight terrorism. Others saw it as yet another reason that our guns laws in this country are too lax. Still others saw it as a hate crime perpetrated on a vulnerable minority group. It was interesting to see how few saw it as a possible combination of all those factors which it no doubt was. However, as an educator I was interested in what it taught us about our work.

In the days following the shooting more information came out on the killer. I was particularly interested in his childhood and his personality. His many "selfies" showed a man who seemed pretty narcissistic. Unbounded narcissism is dangerous because the narcissist has no concern for how he or she affects others. The killer clearly liked how he looked. This is interesting because as a child he was described as being overweight and often bullied. He offset this by becoming a body builder who may have used supplements to allow him to build a muscular body which he liked showing off. He offset his insecurities by becoming more physically powerful. Ultimately physical power wasn't enough so he bought some guns.

He moved towards adult work in the law enforcement area, even though his unusual behavior kept him off the police force and moved him towards private security work. He wanted to have authority over others and, in the early morning hours at the Pulse nightclub, he finally did.

We have seen similar patterns from other mass killers. They were bullied as children and then overcompensated for this using antisocial behavior and by taking up guns. The NRA likes to say that "guns don't kill people, people kill people," and that it is really the lack of adequate services to the mentally ill that is the problem. While you might argue whether our gun culture might not have a bit to do with the problem (other countries also have disturbed people but seem to avoid the numbers of mass killings we have because they have tough gun laws), it must be recognized that someone who goes out and shoots five or fifty people clearly has some mental issues.

Where do these issues start? I would argue that they start in childhood, often with bullying, sometimes from rebellion against authoritarian parents. And they always involve a lack of empathy from others and for others.

Several years ago at the American Association of School Administrators, we had Monty Roberts as a speaker. Monty is known as the original "horse whisperer" whose unorthodox training of horses led to a hit movie of the same name and great attention from thousands. Who doesn't love a good story about horses?

In fact, we are all familiar with the cowboy movies that show the riders "breaking" the horses by riding them hard until they stop bucking and then submit to the rider's will. Sometimes the horse wins a battle and bucks the rider off, but it always loses the war and it is ultimately tamed. For years that was seen as the only way to tame a horse. Monty's approach was very different.

Monty used, what he called, “joining up” with the horse. He tried to make the process one of cooperation and collaboration between rider and horse. By working with the horse this way, he is essentially able to convince the horse that he wants to let the rider ride him. The horse is treated gently and with respect. It is given time to get used to the idea of a rider before the rider ever tries to mount the horse. He talks to the horse and the horse answers with cooperation.

Monty has gotten phenomenal results from his methods. He has actually trained wild horses, in the wild, where they could have escaped if they chose. But they let him work with him and let him ride them. At the conference he told a moving story of working with a horse in the wild only to see the horse leave once he was freed from his tether. Monty waited for hours for the horse to return. Night came and there was no horse. All of Monty’s theories about training were lost when the horse ran away. Then the next morning, he saw a blip on the horizon which got bigger and bigger. It was the horse returning to the man who had shown him respect. The audience of AASA was stunned when the same horse came walking down the center aisle of the convention hall where Monty was speaking. Monty had taken something wild, allowed it to keep its dignity and taught it to work with him in a harmonious way to achieve a gentled outcome. Man and horse had bonded.

What would happen if we spent more of our efforts at working with children in the same way Monty works? Could we help them be better people without breaking their spirits? Could we make them more cooperative and collaborative if we chose to work with them instead of trying to bend them to our will? Could we show them more empathy so that they could return it to the world?

Now most teachers would say that they do this, but is that what really happens in classrooms? Schools and classrooms are pretty hierarchical places. Someone is in charge (the rider or teacher) and things have to be moved along. This leads to a lot of bronco-breaking behavior.

I have always advocated for better efforts at social and emotional learning because I think it is based more on the idea of “joining up” than riding the bucking bronco into submission.

I would argue if we had more SEL in schools, the teachers and the children would be less “wild” and we might see a decrease in bullying and others behaviors that lead some of our more damaged people towards destroying the lives of others. Maybe it is worth our “joining up” to find out.